

An Interview with Marion Bentley



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It's interesting, because I came to BYU directly from Rutgers. So here I was from a university twenty minutes from New York City, where I had a wonderful time there teaching introduction to theatre, and requiring them to see shows on Broadway. At that time, you could get balcony seats for \$2.75 or \$3.50. Any time a show went on "twoofers," I could require it for students to go see. It was a marvelous three years that I spent back there, and I could have stayed forever, but I had promised the family that we would come back west after three years, so we came. I miss that, and I kept thinking about how advantageous it would be, to be close to New York. So, I really wanted to set up a BYU East program.

I have a former student of mine named Atkin Pace. Atkin got his bachelor's degree at the University of Utah and then went to Yale, and he was a classmate of—my age gets to me occasionally, he's won so many academy awards—Yale graduate Meryl Streep. I've really followed her career quite closely, because she was doing things at that time; she did two one-acts. One was *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and the other was a Tennessee Williams, and it was interesting that she did that too, because she was just a totally different physical type. The Tennessee Williams play was quite physical, so she had quite a different figure than she did in *Memory of Two Mondays*. I think that is a play by Arthur Miller.

Anyway, I was really interested in getting this program set up, because Atkin, when he graduated from Yale, he went immediately to work for Ming Cho Lee, and then he was working with, I don't know—he's won more Academy Awards than anybody in design—he's worked with him for about seventeen years, I guess. He was excited because he said, "You know, we can have all kinds of things particularly useful in design, it could be very useful." I'd even investigated possible housing accommodations and whatnot, but we never did quite get it off the ground.

However, I was very active in study abroad, so when I came to BYU, I was very interested in getting tied up with travel study. We did a little project here in the college that we were doing for a study abroad where we planned a trip to San Francisco. I had people who were going, and these were all theatre people, arts people. We had them review the whole transportation system and the arts in San Francisco and all of those things. We had actually piloted everything, and then when I signed up with travel study, we tried to take students who were going to be interested in all of the arts. It was so successful, we kept having people who wanted to take their mother or grandmother, and so soon we had a whole array going. We opened it up and I did a travel study with that department all of my years at BYU. Then we did study abroad for two years, when we were based in London, and I was delighted to see that they were all very active participants now. Kenneth Branagh was very active when we were there; he did a production of *Hamlet*. It was interesting because he had the scene with his mother in the dressing room, and there was a clothes rack there, and it was cataclysmic. I think he fell, but he didn't lose contact at all. It was interesting.

I have a son who's interested in theatre, and so he really got hooked on Shakespeare, and so we went to see—it might have been *King Lear*—and we were sitting on the front row in the old theatre. Chris has been absolutely hooked on Shakespeare ever since. He just recently has done a revision of the Scottish play, *Macbeth*, and *Macbeth* needed some reworking for sure.

Phonetics

Something that I felt our people lacked was a phonetic background. I taught voice and diction, and they needed it for that. You certainly already had to have it for the dialects class, so I actually taught the phonetic alphabet for the first two weeks. We thought we had people who had a background, but I think a lot of our faculty members really didn't have a background in that. It really was essential, and I think we really ought to teach phonetics, because we need it for just basic stage diction.

Something that we did that I thought was helpful as well was that we had a pretty good dialects class that went on and on and on, but certainly, as many dialects as we were trying to cover, you couldn't really master it, so we were aiming at a kind of genetic dialect. There are the characteristic sounds, and they did pretty well with those. We'd work with those so we'd have to do a dialect in maybe a week, maybe two weeks. But it was difficult to accomplish all that in that amount of time, but we tried to. We wrote it out phonetically, and then they could get up and talk phonetically. We'd have them bring something to class that they could talk about, so that they could get the transfer from the sounds they learned, and then they had to write it out phonetically so that they knew where they were going. I learned a lot, and they're reinforcing that.

I'm so pleased it is still taught here, because I had a former student turn up today and say, "We need a dialects class at UVU, can you teach me how to teach it in an hour?" and I said, "I don't think so." I hope he wasn't hired. I think it was very useful. We did a lab course that was basic phonetic sounds in each of those dialects. People could go in and listen and hear and talk so we could get familiarized with it, and I hope they're able to use that still.

Favorite Teaching Moments

There are a lot of teaching moments that I loved, because I loved teaching. I could have gone on teaching forever. My wife didn't know I was going to retire when I came home and said I'd retired. When I left, it was a time when they had the opportunity to get some people with the BYU background that they wanted to have. I guess the moments I usually loved best were when we got to a point, probably in a dress rehearsal, that they came alive. I taught at Dixie for about fourteen years, and I had no one there who had any kind of background or experience. I had to teach everything from day one. We started where we needed to and got all the background. I worked rehearsals quite technically: in terms of walk, in terms of carriage, in terms of whatever, and then we went through the mechanics of line reading and whatnot. Then you get to the point where it looks pretty bad. It's interesting; we were working on *A Thousand Clowns* and the fellow who was playing the lead for me was a young men's president, so he did a lot of activities, and the last weekend working, my wife came over and said, I can't stand it, this is terrible, and it was terrible. I said, "Okay, let's all sit down and talk about this character," and we did, and she came back two hours later, and suddenly it was all there. I work so that they have a technical foundation, so sometimes in terms of carriage and whatnot, but it's all very technical. Then we have to talk it through in terms of relating it to their own experience, so, suddenly, they're hearing lines, and reacting, and getting an audience response. When we had a run of a week, we had a good show by opening night.

Those moments were sort of magical. That was a kind of approach that I took out of necessity, because I did a lot of things with breathing. Emotionally, laughing and crying are, very essentially, the same thing. So, I have them breathe. They're trying to hold it in, and we've began to tremble, bit by bit, and then you let go. Laughing is just the same thing, but you push, push, push, and then, "Hahahahaha." Anyway. It can be fairly natural, but it has a mechanical base. I had a lot of interesting experiences with those.

I did a classroom production of *The Bad Seed*. I had a girl who was perfect for that part: the mother of the little boy who gets drowned. I taught her how to cry. It was painful, every night the audience was just sobbing in the scenes that she came in, because she really mastered that, and she used it for a beauty contest talent award and whatnot. That was the kind of experience where you can help somebody to the point where they are being very successful in terms of what they are trying to do. We had plenty of opportunities like that.

When I did *Othello*, they said, well, you have to have a Black. So I was stopping buses and seeing at bus stops if there was anybody getting off in Provo who happened to be the right color for me. There never was, but I had an experience with a girl who'd moved here, she was a student, and her husband was black. I had baptized him into the Church, and I said, "How would you like to do *Othello*?" and he said, "I would love to do *Othello*." He was interested in theater,

anyway. So we cast it; it had a lot of faculty in it and I thought it was an exciting cast to work with. It was fun working with people who were a little more experienced. The Desdemona was a girl I thought I might cast as Bianca, but she auditioned, she really worked on auditions and she aced it. So I cast her as Desdemona. I kept wanting her to work on crying, because there's scenes where she really has to have that mastered. But she said, "It's technical, I don't want to do anything technical." And I said, "I think it would be wise to learn something technical anyway." We did the best we could do. She never really got up to what she did in the audition. Now she's teaching. I have a granddaughter who is coming back and looking at schools. She went down to UVU, and there was my Desdemona, who's teaching down there now.

Service at BYU

I was hired at BYU as a member of the Honors Program, and I think that's a fantastic program. I think that we're very competitive with a lot of first-rate institutions, Ivy League and otherwise. I've been involved there, but I was very involved with general education, and I got very knowledgeable about transfer problems, so I was auditioning people. I was responsible for sort of bridging the gap between the high schools around the state. I think some of them were joining with the national group—the thespians. And so, the year I was president, I said, "Let's team up together," and then we were doing that together, we were doing auditions. We always—when we did the theater conference—had auditions for all the institutions coming in to give scholarships. I became very well versed in what the transfer problems were, and what they were able to do, and I sort of ran interference.

It's been very helpful because you get a pretty good idea. One of the things I think I was very helpful with, was I tried never to miss a show that was happening in one of the high schools. So they used to call on me to judge the play competitions, and you got very well acquainted with what was happening, and students were getting the right training.

I had a number of collaborations. One of them that I think is most significant, is when they allowed me to go back when my assistant, Stephanie Breinholdt was competing in the Irene Ryans, and she's the first person we had who won. Stephanie and I spent a lot of time together. She had the lead in *She Stooped, She Conquered*, which was fun to do.

Of course, working with other faculty members, I loved doing the musicals; it was always fun working with all of those people, in terms of every musical. I did *My Fair Lady* here with Mindy Smoot; she married a Johnson. She did *My Fair Lady* at Tuacahn. Those were always so exciting. When you've got a show like that with performers who are really on top of it, it's exciting.

Royal Academy of Music in London

I had an interesting experience in London when I was there working on my PhD. I was studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, Center School, and Weber Douglas, which is a school that concentrated on musical theater. They said, of course, after our three years of training they wouldn't expect a student to be able to carry a whole performance. At Dixie, we expect them with no training, but maybe a five or six week rehearsal, to carry a whole show: *Music Man*, any show, and Shakespeare, whatever.

While I was in London, Marion Hanks was the mission president, and he said, "Oh, while you're here, why don't you do a production of *Promised Valley* for us?" I said, "Well, I've done that before, I'd be happy to do it, if my wife can design the set." The music director he had in mind was a student at the Royal Academy of Music, it looked like maybe a 22-year-old.

He said, "We've got the woman for you, and she's a cook." She was kind of a Jemima shape, and the age, and I said, "I don't think that this is going to work." We had been in Paris, and they were doing *Promised Valley* there, you know, as the church was doing it. You went through the row and everybody kissed you on the cheeks and sat down. There was a girl that Dana had been in

White Key with at BYU. So I said, “I’m not sure that this is a possibility, but if you can get that girl’s mission changed from Paris to London for six weeks, I think that would work.”

It turned out, Benjamin Britten had a company he had put together to take some short opera scenes to Paris, and there was a friend that was in that company who was a friend of our music student who we had picked as the lead. This fellow was a professional, and we had the two of them as the leads. Then he had missionaries come in, he had people from all over. It really was terrible, I think because his missionaries were less serious than some. They’d come in at noon to shoot baskets all afternoon so they wouldn’t be late for rehearsal at eight o’clock at night. When he left I said, “Did you hate to give it up?” He said, “Three years of babysitting is enough for anybody.”

But it was a successful experience we had. It was for investigators. We had packed houses, and I have a little buffalo that the cast gave us as a memento.

This was on my own. I had a year’s leave. My thesis was on the British system of actor training, so I spent a whole year there. Particularly useful was the training at the Royal Academy, because they had a lot of people from Russia, and they had people who were playing in the west end come in to teach a class. A class in comedy or whatever they wanted to teach. It was fun. That was a very worthwhile experience, the Central School was very good with vocal training, and I thought that that work was particularly useful.

Opera Program

I was going to mention working with Larry (Lawrence Vincent) in the opera program because Larry came here from Vienna, and he was an honorary citizen of Vienna. He had directed in the opera there for a number of years, and he felt at home. When we visited Vienna, he told us what we had to eat, and what we had to see and do, and that was fun. I directed *The Merry Widow* with him, and it was a great experience. In the opera program, they use two casts—they don’t think you can sustain vocally with only one cast. So I had two casts: one was a girl I had seen in the show in Logan in the summer program, and she came down. I had fun—the other cast was fun, comic characters, some of them. Then for the music, me and my sister, Elder Holland’s mother, had one of our favorite numbers, “Vilja the Witch of the Wood,” from that opera. Then working with the cast, one of them was the son of someone who teaches in the opera program here. The other was a fellow who was in my ward, and when he auditioned, I thought how condescending he was to the accompanist and his comments. They’re his people so I thought, “I’m not about to cast a diva.” But he came through and it was a wonderful experience, he was terrific. That was a very successful experience, and I’ve kept pretty much in touch with Larry.

We have a granddaughter who is studying classical voice with a woman who studied and went to Julliard and Yale, and then she did a production of *La Boheme* on television. She won a Tony; she played Mimi. My granddaughter’s been studying voice with her for the last six years. She married a fellow from St. George, and I knew his father very well, and so they were interested in attending, in participating at Tuacahn. So I told them they were doing “Memory,” the song she does, and so she did it. She was doing a series of opera scenes in Provo, so I called and said, somebody’s got to come up and listen to her, because she is tailor-made. Nobody came, but my artistic director down there called her in, and boy she wowed him. So she played in *Cats*. When they did a concert version of *Cats*, a good friend of ours was a teacher of voice there, and she did that *Cats* number. When she did that, this girl walked on that stage, boy, she owned that stage. She was great.

The Gospel and Acting

While I was here, an LDS student went to the University of Utah, and ended up suing them because of the things that she was asked to do. I think sometimes when people have freedom, they just go crazy and choose all the wrong things. I felt that we didn’t really handicap ourselves in any

of the shows that we did. We did all kinds of shows, and I didn't think that we were really compromising.

I found this current issue of *Time*, and one of the shows I watch quite zealously when I can is at 8:00 Sunday Morning, and this last issue of *Time* and the show last Sunday morning, tell us that the next challenge we're going to have in terms of equality is transgender. There are all sorts of movements now to accommodate people who are. I was interested in reading about with housing, student housing, because they were saying, you know, you don't have to have male and female restrooms, you know anybody can go to the restroom. Well, we're not conditioned to that, and I think this is a challenge, and I think it's upon us. That's going to be quite interesting.

But I find, I think that a lot of people are broad-minded, but a lot of people, to show they're broadminded, sort of push and pull all stops. Some of those things I think are a little offensive. I think we're better understating than overstating. I think those are challenges that I didn't ever feel, either at Dixie or here, that I made any serious compromises. Certainly we played Shakespeare, and Shakespeare is full of innuendos and all kinds of things.

I really specialized in British Isles Tours, I did the British Isles and Ireland. Whenever I had a group, and sometimes I'd pick up a group that somebody else had sent, I'd say, "If you haven't seen Les Mis, you really have to go see it, because it's the best thing playing." It's only in recent productions that I've seen that I've gone, "They've really cheapened it," and there's plenty that you can find in that to play to make offensive. It's interesting with the Thenardiers, the last time I saw it in London, I thought, "You don't need to cheapen it. You really ought to just play it the way they've played it before. It's tasteful, it's understated, and we get the message, we get the idea." I think that there are a lot of members of the church that are of our same ilk that feel that understatement is a little more artistic and a little bit more effective.

Favorite Faculty

I've so much enjoyed all of my exchanges with faculty. In St. George, we operated on a shoestring. So I spent my every summer in San Francisco trying to buy enough fabric that was on sale someplace that I could use to costume a show. I compromised by finding people there who were willing to work for nothing. I had Olive Esplin, who was a good friend of my best friend. She was a seamstress, and I said, "I don't have a costumer. I can get the costumes designed, but can you help make them?" When at Dixie, the president said, "Would you like to do an opera?" I said, "No, I'd like to do a musical. Let me do *Kiss Me, Kate*." So we did *Kiss Me, Kate*. They gave me \$250. Well, the royalties were more than that. Anyway, I had a woman in the community who sang, a returned missionary who sang, and I worked the two of them as the leads, and then cast all these other people. Then what I did was: a friend of mine designed an outlining of the costume, and then put together the fabric that my friend and I had spent the whole summer buying in San Francisco, and we had them sewn by dress rehearsal. She ultimately got a job as a designer there, after a few more years and got a little more education. I also enjoyed working with Ron Garner, who was hired the year after I was hired there—he just finished 52 years of teaching at Dixie.

I loved all of the choreographers I worked with at BYU. Interestingly enough, one is a good friend of mine, the Clarks. The Clarks used to have this store, and they used to have a big business; they were interviewed in New York, all over. Amy Clark choreographed *Brigadoon* for me, and that was a tough show. The toughest part to do was the chase, with the guys trying to leave, and so we had a wild time getting it staged. And she did *The Merry Widow* for me; I've got that videoed. That was a very rewarding relationship. She sort of understood what I was doing. It was fun working with her.

Favorite Productions

One of my favorite shows I did was *The Foreigner*. Some of my problems were all involved in that, but it was really a delightful show to do. I had a fellow who was sort of working for me, I don't know that they really had him hired, but anyway, he was around. As soon as I announced

that, he wrote home and told his mother, he said, “I’ve got to be in this play! It’s the play *Foreigner*, and it’s the lead. I’ve got to have it!” Well, we auditioned and it went on and on and on, and I kept reading these two people. The one is our only LDS filmmaker for a long time, Richard Dutcher, and so it was painful, because the more I sat there, I said, “Richard is going to get this part.” Well, anyway, Richard got the part. And so, this fellow who worked for me was really upset. His wife said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” So I called Richard in and I said, “Well, I hate to put this on you, but it’s so rare that you get a part like this, it seems a shame not to have somebody else have an opportunity to do it.” He said, “Well, I prefer not, but if you want to do it, go ahead.” We did it. They were both great in it. I had absolutely an ideal cast. It was just amazing.

The woman who played the aunt, she’s a good friend. She was just wonderful. One of her favorite lines is when the Klu Klux Klan is coming and she’s trying to think who could help: “Who ain’t dead?” That’s one of our quotes these days. “Who ain’t dead?” And the kid, Ellard, he really was an amazing kid. He sort of seemed feeble minded, which he was not at all, but he was very slow. That was one of my favorite shows and we got through it. It was difficult because so much you had to rely on the actor to do. Some of the things that Richard did were just terrific. We sort of kept it pure, that whatever Richard did, he did, and whatever the other did, he did it. I thought that the guy that played the villain in that was great: they’d drink a coke and say, “I like it hot.” There were some of those lines we’d do that I thought were just great. The fellow who played the preacher in that was John Enos—his sister, Mireille Enos, has had a series on TV, a mystery series, *The Killing*. I’m just very interested in it.

General Education Program at BYU

I was about to talk about general education, because I thought I was being hired at Las Vegas, and I was working on a model cities project in Newark, New Jersey at the time. My mother had come to visit with us, and I was working in the model cities project, and they had sent someone from Las Vegas to interview me, and they had not made an appointment. They called my mother, who didn’t know anything, and she said, “Well, he’s not here.” Well, I’m here! So that job disappeared. What happened was they were firing a guy to hire me, and I thought, that is not an ideal situation to go into. So how did I get started?

When I came back from Rutgers, I was out of a job, because my job was up. Bruce Hafen had just finished his law degree, and was very nervous about being a lawyer, so he said, “Oh, why don’t you come and join the Honors program?” I came and was put in charge of—it’s called ILE—Independent Learning Experience. That was an exciting program to work in, because if people wanted to do film, we could put together a program. But it all had to make sense. I loved that.

Then I was working: I was hired by Terry Warner, who was in charge of that Honors program. It was interesting, because we had a terrible time with it. Nobody wanted to change anything. They all wanted to teach what they’d been teaching for years. Nobody wanted to do anything else. This was a whole new program, and so the physicists and the physical sciences, they met every week to review the questions that were on that quiz to be sure that they were legitimate questions that were focused, as they needed to be focused. Which was phenomenal. That kind of thing was happening with that, and people were just irate.

I am inoffensive, and so they didn’t throw things at me. So, they sent me over to the English Department to try to pacify people about the new GE program. I thought it was quite an exciting program. We finally got it working. The form of devotional, they tried everything to make those work, but nothing worked. They’d give them a grade, they’d mark them present or not. What finally happened, we got a program out of California, from a fellow who’s son is here now on the faculty. What he insisted was that they have this “capture” program. They go to this and they have to capture “What is the point that guy is trying to make?” And “What are the supporting arguments?” It was working beautifully, because if you’re listening actively, then you were

involved. This was in conjunction with English. We had just had that in effect for about three years and we were just beginning to see some results when Jeff—Jeff Holland is my nephew—was just appointed President of BYU. He wrote me a letter and said “This is the toughest letter I’ve had to write because there is so much static about that program, and I just cannot push it anymore. So, farewell.” That was the end of that program. But it was a terrific program, and it was really working, and we were seeing results. I was very involved in a lot of the GE Programs, but my interest was always in the Theater. ‘Til the bitter end, right?